

Common Substances of Abuse for Youth

When parents today think of substance abuse, many believe that cigarettes, alcohol, and illegal drugs are the main culprits. The truth is that many other substances are being misused and abused for purposes other than they were intended. Substance abuse can start as early as elementary school and continue far beyond college. There are many substances of abuse and this list highlights a few of the more trendy ones.

Energy Drinks

Energy drinks (such as Red Bull®, Full Throttle®, Monster®, and Rock Star®) contain large doses of caffeine and/or non-caffeine stimulants that increase energy, enhance mood and delay sleep. Look for these ingredients on labels: guarana, theine, methyltheobromine, ginseng, and ma-huang among others. Caffeine and other stimulants can be found in soda, coffee, tea, gum, mints, sports bars, and some alcoholic beverages. Energy drinks differ from sports drinks (such as Gatorade® or Powerade®) because sports drinks are intended to re-hydrate the body. Energy drinks are typically marketed toward young people as natural alternatives to improve physical and mental abilities.

Symptoms of caffeine poisoning may include: nausea, vomiting, nervousness, tremor, insomnia, restlessness, delirium, sweating, headache, seizures, and increased heart rhythm. Use caution with energy drinks in combination with exercise, alcohol and medicines.

When mixed with alcohol the stimulants in energy drinks can mask the effects of alcohol (a depressant). This lures some people into drinking more than they normally would, and feeling they are more sober than they really are – increasing the likelihood of driving while intoxicated or engaging in other risky behavior.

Inhalants

Inhalants are products and substances like solvents and gases that are abused to get a “high”. Inhalants are a special concern because kids can die the first, tenth or hundredth time they sniff or huff. There are more than 1,000 products that are very dangerous when inhaled – such as gasoline, glue, air freshener, paint, computer keyboard duster, and even vegetable cooking spray.

Young people who might never try marijuana or other illegal drugs may try inhalants because they are legal products, easy to get, inexpensive, and perceived as safe. Though people of all ages have been found to use inhalants, they are most commonly used among 7th through 9th graders.

Tweens can experience toxic effects like a dazed appearance, slurred speech, nose bleeds and loss of muscle control. Possible risks from inhalants include loss of consciousness and irreversible damage to the brain, liver, kidneys, and bone marrow. Chronic users can suffer severe and permanent brain, liver and kidney damage. Look for unusually large collections of paint, spray cans, or room deodorizers and notice red eyes or chemical smells on the breath or clothing.

Prescription Drugs

Prescription drug misuse or abuse can occur when someone other than the intended person takes a prescription medicine, or if someone uses it in ways other than how the prescription was written. This includes the medicine being used by a different person, in a different amount, or in a different way. Many parents don't understand how widespread prescription drug abuse is or don't think that it is something their child would be involved with. Every day, 2,000 teenagers use a prescription drug to get high for the first time.

There are many reasons for misusing or abusing prescription drugs: some want to get high, some seek help with studying, some want to treat medical problems, and others want to block out the world. Some of the most commonly abused prescriptions are: narcotics (OxyContin®, Vicodin®), anxiety medicines (Xanax®, Valium®) and stimulants (Ritalin®, Concerta®, Adderall®). These drugs may already be in the home, or

may be easy to access. Also, because they're prescription medicines, some users may see them as safer than illegal drugs.

Some students are looking for a short-cut to academic excellence. ADHD drugs like Adderall and Ritalin are abused as "brain boosters" or "academic enhancers". Misusing or abusing these drugs could lead to revving effects like increased heart rate, restlessness, seizures or difficulty breathing among others.

Prescription drugs are prescribed by a doctor after examining and reviewing the patient's condition and medical history. The right drug and dose is prescribed for a specific medical condition. Abusers attempting to treat a legitimate illness could still become sick from taking medicines that do not belong to them. The abuser might take the wrong amount, the medicine might react to other medicines the person is taking, or other medical conditions the person has.

Over-the-Counter (OTC) Drugs

Over-the-counter drugs are those you can buy without a prescription. Teens are accessing OTC's for recreational use in the comfort of their home as easily as opening a cupboard, drawer, or medicine cabinet.

One of the most common over-the-counter medicines currently used to get high is dextromethorphan (DXM). DXM is the active ingredient in cough suppressants found in many OTC cough and cold medicines. Abusers take as much as 10 times that recommended to cure coughs. DXM has euphoric, psychedelic, and dissociative effects.

Synthetic Marijuana (including Spice and K2) Synthetic marijuana is herbs or plants that have been sprayed or coated with chemicals that can produce a high similar to marijuana when smoked. Synthetic marijuana is currently legally being sold in many states marketed as incense or potpourri. K2 can cause increased heart rate, loss of consciousness, paranoia, hallucinations and psychotic episodes. Several states have recently made synthetic marijuana illegal. Little is known about the toxicological or chemical effects of synthetic marijuana.

Substance Abuse Tips for Parents

- Monitor the amount of caffeine and other stimulants your child is consuming.
- Know their tolerance for caffeine and other stimulants and how it affects their bodies.
- Emphasize adequate rest/sleep and nutrition for your student as well as balancing academic and school activities with down-time and more enjoyable pursuits.
- If addicted to inhalants, seek treatment.
- Do not tolerate experimentation with inhalants.
- Know the signs and symptoms of inhalant abuse.
- Educate school staff as to the dangers of inhalants.
- Talk to your children early about inhalants as abuse can start as young as age 10.
- Stress the importance of only taking medicine that is prescribed for you and following all instructions.
- Don't share prescribed medicines with others.
- Properly dispose of unused medicines.
- Ask for smaller quantities of drugs to reduce accessibility in the home.
- Know what OTC and prescription medicines you have in your home. Do pill counts and monitor use.
- If necessary, lock up OTC and prescription medicines in your home to make access more challenging.
- Act as a good role model for your child in medicine safety.
- Talk to your children about substances of abuse to make sure they know the facts about the dangers of using these substances.

- Keep an eye open for unusual substances or amounts of substances in your children's bedrooms or book bags.
- Watch for changes in behavior in your child.
- Discuss coping skills.
- If someone is in a situation where they may have overdosed call your local poison center at 1-800-222-1222. The call is free, confidential, and handled by medical experts.
- For help with problems related to substance abuse, talk to your school counselor.

For more information on substances of abuse:

National Clearinghouse for Alcohol and Drug Information www.health.org

- Recent publications and statistics, database of resources. Federal site. Includes publications.

National Council on Alcoholism & Drug Dependency (NCADD) www.ncadd.org

- Information regarding alcohol abuse.
- Programs include toolkit of materials including press releases, public service announcements, and suggested activities.

National Families in Action (NFIA) www.nationalfamilies.org

- Q and A advise section answered by parents of recovered child abusers.

National Inhalant Prevention Coalition (NIPC) www.inhalants.org

- Has sections for suggested topics for teachers and schools in regard to inhalant abuse.
- Reference section of links to other substance abuse organizations.

National Institute on Drug Abuse (NIDA) www.teens.drugabuse.gov

- Teen-friendly science-based information on drugs of abuse

Partnership for a Drug Free America www.drugfree.org

- List of current drugs of abuse, their street names, their effects.
- Parent toolkit, suggesting areas of concern per age and suggested conversation tools.
- Further information and suggestions on prescription medication abuse.

Poison Control Center: www.aapcc.org

- There are 60 poison centers covering the U.S. Each center is independent. Some are involved in educational outreach involving substance abuse prevention and some are not. To see if your local poison center can be of assistance with outreach call 1-800-222-1222 and ask to speak to an educator.
- All poison centers all the time will take any call regarding a poison exposure.